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4701 WILLARD AVENUE, CHEVY CHASE, MARYLAND 20815 (301) 656-4

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FORREST SAWYER: 1985 is certainly turning out to be the year of the spy, something of a year-long spy thriller. The latest reported defection is from East to West this time, with a high-ranking KGB officer turning himself over to the CIA. But this year we've seen spies trading loyalties in both directions.

This morning we want to ask three top espionage experts what we should make of all this cloak-and-dagger traffic: Stanislav Levchenko, himself a former KGB major, who defected to the United States in 1979. Now, to protect his identity, we're not going to tell you where he is or show you what he looks like.

Joining us from our Washington studios, Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont. He is Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

And Donald ~~Tomison~~ ^{JAMESON}, a former CIA official who is a specialist on Soviet intelligence and the KGB.

Senator Leahy, let me start with you, if I may. You have recently been briefed about what this Soviet defector, Vitaly Yurchenko (?), who is 50 years old, has been saying. And one of the things that's in the press is he is claiming that CIA employees, or former employees, are double agents.

What do you make of it?

SENATOR PATRICK LEAHY: Well, the CIA has denied that there are any current agents who are double agents who have been penetrated by the KGB, based on anything he said. And I know of nothing that would make me disbelieve that denial by the CIA about current agents.

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SAWYER: Well, that leaves a hole you can drive a truck through. Former employees could be somebody that left last night.

SENATOR LEAHY: Well, the way they discuss former employees, I'm really not in a position to comment on that, and wouldn't.

I think one of the things that has come out of all this, though, is a realization that the KGB has suffered an enormous body blow, which probably will give a lot of people a lot of satisfaction here, and should. I hope, however, that the State Department, which has been totally negligent in the way they've handled counterespionage -- and, for that matter, the Department of Defense has been quite negligent in handling counterespionage -- I hope that they now don't just sit back and coast along as they have in the past. I hope they realize what the threat really is.

SAWYER: Well, Senator, forgive me for not leaving the point, but I gather what you're saying is you cannot talk about the allegation that former employees were acting as agents of the KGB, which suggests that where there's smoke there's fire?

SENATOR LEAHY: I think that you have to understand that the KGB is constantly going to do everything possible to penetrate our intelligence service, just as we would theirs. I don't think, though, that you will find anybody that's going to be in a position where they can with certitude say whether they were successful in the past; or if they were, who would be able, without breaking serious confidences, to say it.

I would say this, though, that our ability to stop such penetration is probably the best in any country. In fact, we are better than the other Western countries. And in many ways, we're better than the KGB itself.

SAWYER: Mr. Levchenko, let me ask you. What do you think of the claims that are being made, apparently by Mr. Yurchenko, that the CIA has been penetrated?

STANISLAV LEVCHENKO: It's hard for me to say, to speculate. But basically, in this, if you want, silent war between intelligence and counterintelligence services in all kinds of things, it at least potentially can happen.

SAWYER: I'm not sure exactly what that means.

LEVCHENKO: All kinds of intelligence and counterintelligence services -- and, of course, KGB is the largest intelligence service in the world -- are trying to penetrate each other

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decades, you know. And at least potentially, sometimes such penetration can take place.

SAWYER: In 1979, or prior to that, were you aware of any deep penetration of the CIA?

LEVCHENKO: No. When I was with KGB, I had no knowledge about any penetration of CIA.

SAWYER: Mr. Jamieson, there's so much traffic back and forth between the East and West, you could almost lay a highway. What's going on this year?

~~DONALD JAMIESON~~ ^{JAMIESON}: Well, this does seem to be the year of the great exchange. The Germans, of course, are being sent East, or going East voluntarily. I think maybe there may even be an Eastern plot to try to weaken the West German government by pulling several of its agents in, particularly the Free Democratic Party there.

And on this question of the KGB people, we've had now one military man, military intelligence man from Athens, and then the chief of station in London, which is a tremendous blow to them -- from the KGB, that is. And then, of course, Mr. Yurchenko, whose exact position I don't quite understand, but he seems to be a very high and senior official. So that these things have happened.

Of course, you mentioned in the past it's true that the CIA has had employees -- Mr. Kampiles, for example, and then the one from Indochina, who have worked for the CIA -- or for the KGB. But I think the agency has always been very prompt in revealing these cases. So I would certainly believe that if the agency says that they don't have any current employees who have been identified, they mean it. And that must be the case.

SAWYER: Mr. Levchenko, you were a gentleman who came over to the West from the Soviet Union. Why do you think so many are doing it this year?

LEVCHENKO: It is a very good question. First of all, it does look like, because of a variety of happenings inside of the Soviet Union, because of very painful and dramatic transition of power period, you know, when one Soviet leader was changing after another almost within months -- at the same time, more and more people inside of KGB became quite seriously disenchanted, at least with the Soviet politics. And what is extremely important is that it looks like most of these defections are for primarily political reasons, rather than other reasons. It shows that the elite and backbone of the Soviet socialist society, KGB, did start to have very serious problems.

On the other hand, I think that most of the -- or at least some of the Western services, including American intelligence community, sometime in early 1970s started to invest better manpower skills, sophistication into their intelligence and counterintelligence activity. And now, probably, these things started to pay.

SAWYER: Senator Leahy, we've read one report where it is said that because of a purge that Mr. Gorbachev is making of the KGB, which was run at a time by his predecessor, Yuri Andropov, some of these agents are choosing to leave because their careers were in tatters.

Is it possible that this is a career move and not a political act?

SENATOR LEAHY: Well, I think some of them may possibly be a career move. You know, you never know what motivates somebody, whether they have a blow-up with the boss and want to leave. But I think that'd be oversimplifying it terribly. I've heard those same reports. I don't put an awful lot of stock in them.

I think that the KGB, themselves, aren't too sure just what is happening. These are their elite that are leaving. These are the people that have the dachas and the cars and, you know special shopping privileges and everything else; and they're leaving. It has increased the paranoia in the KGB. It's caused a body blow to them. And the KGB, themselves, don't know just why they are leaving. And I'm just as happy they don't.

SAWYER: Well, gentlemen, we will be intrigued to watch developments that come of all this. And we thank you all for joining us this morning.